Forms Management

Introduction

A form is any printed instrument, usually paper, which contains predetermined blank spaces for the insertion of information. Information collected by forms can include anything needed to fulfill the purpose of an organization. Forms play a central role in the transaction of business because they are a standard method of collecting and conveying information.

Forms are necessary for the operation of an organization because they document variable information and predetermine information that remains constant. Forms also provide the easiest and most efficient link between manual record-keeping and data entry.

Additionally, forms are much easier to prepare than open-ended instruments such as letters or reports, because when a form is well designed, responses are confined, i.e., the information being sought is defined and the respondent knows what is expected.

Forms management assures that only necessary forms are designed, produced, and distributed, and that unnecessary documents are eliminated. The elements of forms management generally consist of forms analysis, forms design, forms history files, and forms procurement techniques.

Objective

The objective of a forms management program is to provide the most efficient and economical collection of information needed by an organization to fulfill its purpose. The program operates through:

1. **Design efficiencies** - that provide properly designed, cost-effective forms, redesigning existing forms, designing new forms if needed, eliminating unnecessary forms, and combining forms where possible, and

2. **Control efficiencies** - that develop and implement guidelines and standards for the production and use of forms by controlling printing, handling, ordering, storage and distribution.

By achieving control over forms, forms management helps an organization serve the purposes for which it was created. Because of their contributions to economy and efficiency in record-keeping, forms management programs are integral parts of the records management process.

Forms Analysis

Every form should correspond to a process that fulfills one of the purposes or functions of an organization. A given process will involve all of the steps necessary to record, interpret, communicate, and retain information needed to serve this purpose.

A form generally begins a process. For example, to obtain a driver's license, a form is filled out. This initiates a process that eventually results in the issuance of the license.

Forms analysis is an evaluation of the need for a form, the purpose of a form, its relationship to other currently used forms, and finally an assessment of its effectiveness as a communications tool. Forms analysis therefore must involve a review of the processes the form serves.

Some forms analysis considerations include:

1. **Needs analysis** — Knowing the mission of the organization or agency, and evaluating the specific purpose that requires a process, will allow consideration of:

    a. The purposes of a form, i.e., what the form is intended to accomplish, and

    b. A definition of essential elements in the form that cannot be subject to change or deletion.

    An essential exercise of forms analysis is to challenge the very need for a form, all elements within a form, and finally the need for every copy of the form.

2. **Work flow** — Reviewing the manner in which work is accomplished within an organization, i.e., how an office completes a process, evaluates:

    a. Steps in the work flow process including the types of operations required and when they are performed,

    b. Staff assignments, skill levels, limits of individual responsibility, supervisory structure, and

    c. Work environment, i.e., physical location, equipment, and supplies used.

3. **Related activity** — Addressing similar processes or functions which may be occurring elsewhere. If a similar form already exists, it may be possible to alter it to accommodate a new or dual purpose.

4. **Useage** — The ease with which a respondent completes a form that begins a process is a major concern. The ability of the form to communicate information which obtains the desired result, i.e., the completion of the process, is equally important.

    The required number of copies of a proposed form should anticipate whether the form will be sent to other offices. The form should identify who will keep the original and the copies.

All useage considerations bear directly upon the efficiency and cost of record-keeping operations.

A records management consideration which should be emphasized is the status of forms. All forms and copies of forms that contain responses, whether created or received by an office, are records and are subject to the considerations of active files management (see section VI), semi-current storage (see section III), and legal disposition (see II-4), among others.

Forms Design

Forms design is the execution of a pencil draft or automated equivalent which shows the location of lines and copy and any specification which can be indicated by a drawing. These include items such as the location of perforations and hole punching; paper size, color, and weight; ink color; type size and type style.

Forms may be designed by using graphics software packages available for micro, mini and mainframe computers. The advantages of automated forms design include increased speed in preparing drafts and revisions of forms. Also, camera-ready originals may be produced with a high quality output device such as a laser printer.

Whether forms design is automated or manual, forms should be created to gather necessary information efficiently and economically. A form that requires the least amount of time and labor to collect and distribute accurate information is ideal.

Forms Design Elements

Ballot Boxes

Effective forms are understandable and easy to fill out. A form that uses ballot boxes and pre-printed choices can be completed more quickly and easily than a form which requires respondents to handprint or type an open-ended choice.

Ballot boxes or check boxes are 2/10" wide by 1/6" high, and should always be placed in front of their respective pre-printed choices which should include any possible response to a question. For example, when a “yes” or “no” answer is required, a ballot box should be placed in front of the word “yes,” and another should be placed in front of the word “no.” Both choices must be included on the form, because the absence of a mark where only one choice exists could mean that the respondent simply forgot to answer the question.

Captions

Blank spaces on a form must be captioned to indicate precisely what information is being requested. Captions must be specific and should leave no doubt about how to fill out the form. For example, the caption “date” should not appear alone if there is any question about which possible date is being requested. A specific caption, such as “birth date,” “today’s date,” and “transfer date,” increases the accuracy of a response.

The most efficient location for a caption is in the upper left hand corner of a box. This permits optimum writing space within the box for the response. Also, a respondent's answers are easier to read if a small caption is in the upper corner.

This is especially important when a form is being used for data entry into a computer. Improperly captioned forms slow down and cause errors in the data entry process. If the caption is placed on a line, valuable writing space is lost and responses may be illegible. If it is placed under the line, the respondent may choose to place information either above or below the line.

Distribution and Routing Information

Each form should contain distribution and routing information if the form is to leave the office where it was completed. Multi-part forms must contain instructions for the distribution of each of the parts of the form. Such information can be included as part of the general instructions for using the form, or it may be placed in the bottom margin. Advantages of multi-part forms include greater control of distribution and a reduction of photocopying costs, however, multi-part forms cost more to print.

Form Numbers

All forms must be assigned a number. Forms should also include an edition date. Form numbers are used not only for identification, but also to create forms history and construction files (see page -), and to indicate the origin of a form.

Ink

Black ink is the most cost-effective color to use in printing forms. Color inks add to the cost of forms not only because they are more expensive, but also because when two or more ink colors are used on the same form an additional press run is required and the printing process becomes more costly.

Instructions

Forms should be self-explanatory. Instructions should be placed to the immediate right of a forms's title or directly below the title. Instructions should be numbered, and in outline form to indicate the necessary steps to complete the form.

Lines

Lines are used to create sections on forms, direct the person completing the form to certain areas, and to produce a more aesthetically pleasing document.

Three line thicknesses are used in the design of most forms:

> **Bold lines** are generally used for the border of forms, to separate major sections, or to draw attention to a particular box that summarizes or finalizes information, such as a "grand total" box at the bottom of a column of figures.

Medium lines are used to separate sections of a form within the border of the form.

Light lines or “hairlines” are used to draw ballot boxes and lines within sections.

Margins

A margin on the form is the area between the ink borders and the paper edge. The standard margin is 3/10" on the left and right, and 2/6" on the top and bottom. Top and bottom margins are slightly larger than side margins to allow space for form numbers and routing information.

Some completed forms will be stored in a binder, and will require a one-half inch margin on the left side or top of the form to allow for the holes. Other forms will be placed on a clipboard and space will be needed at the top or left side of the form. Knowledge about the way a form will be used or stored is another benefit of having completed forms analysis.

Paper Size, Weight and Color

Paper sizes and weights are derived from printing industry standards. Using a paper size which is not standard, or readily available, will result in increased printing costs because of the additional cutting and handling required. Use of uncommon paper sizes and shapes also cause filing problems because oversize forms have to be folded to be placed in standard file folders and cabinets, and undersize forms are more likely to be lost.

Comtemporary presses accept 17" x 22" paper from which the following four basic sizes can be cut without waste:

8 1/2" x 11" — the letter size sheet,

8 1/2" x 5 1/2" — half of a letter size sheet,

8 1/2" x 3 2/3" — approximately one-third of a letter size sheet, and

4 1/4" x 5 1/2" — one quarter of a letter size sheet.

These paper sizes can be used either horizontally or vertically, and will satisfy most information recording needs. It is strongly suggested that state agencies and authorities avoid the use of legal size, 11" x 14" paper because of additional costs in purchase, preparation, handling, filing and storage.

For single sheet, single-sided printing, standard paper stock is thirteen pound Bond. For doublesided printing, sixteen pound or heavier paper stock is recommended to prevent bleed-through of print. Card stock should be considered for forms with very high reference or handling rates.

Colored paper adds to the cost of a form. White paper should be used unless an exception can be justified. If an identical design is used for both a debit and credit form, different colors may be used to distinguish one from the other. If a multi-part form is being used, different colors can help clarify distribution requirements.

Shading

Shading should be used to help guide the eyes, highlight columns, or draw attention to a particular part of a form. It may also be used to isolate areas on a form that should not be completed by the respondent. Shading should never be used merely as decoration.

Spacing

Allowing enough space for a respondent to enter information on a form is critical. Too little space will not permit accurate information to be entered easily, while too much space may suggest that additional information is being requested. In either case, the lack of proper spacing can confuse a respondent, lengthen the completion process, and reduce the accuracy of responses.

Some general standards for providing space in forms include: horizontal spacing measured in tenths of an inch, and vertical spacing measured in sixths of an inch. Proposed forms should be designed using forms design paper or automated equipment which employs a grid that corresponds to these dimensions. Forms design paper is readily available from most large stationery suppliers or through art or graphics specialty suppliers.

Single lines entries should be 2/6" in height and long enough to contain requested information. When entries are written or handprinted, approximately five characters will fit to the inch. If a typewriter is used, ten characters will fit to the inch.

Whenever it is anticipated that a form will be completed with a typewriter, vertical spacing should conform to typewriter spacing, i.e. single spaces on a typewriter are one-sixth of an inch. A form must be designed so that the typed keys never fall on a line and ballot boxes are always placed on the one-sixth line.

Titles

All forms must be identified by a form title. The preferred location for the title is the top left corner, or the center of the top line. Form titles should be brief and should identify the primary subject or purpose of a form.

Type Styles and Sizes

When selecting type style and size, the primary goal is ease in readability. Generally, “fancy” type, or a typeface that has many hooks or curls, called serifs, should be avoided. Gothic or sans-serif typeface, sometimes called “clean” type, is recommended to enable a respondent to read captions and instructions as quickly as possible.

For most applications, type size will range from 6 points to 18 points on all forms. The following sizes and their corresponding uses are recommended:

6 pt. type — should be used for marginals, form numbers and other identifying information which appears outside form borders,

8 pt. type — should be used for a box design identifier,

10 pt. type — should be used for section headings and routing information,

14 pt. type — should be used for titles, major section headings, and

18 pt. type — should be used for form titles.

Most type is available in either regular or bold. Bold face should be used only when special attention needs to be directed to a word or phrase, such as a title or section headings.

Creating a Simple Form

The upper left caption box design is the preferred method for designing a form. A caption is placed in the upper left area of a box and the entry is either handprinted or typed below the caption. This design allows a respondent who is completing a form the most space for entering information.

The following steps can serve as a guide in the preliminary design of a simple form:

1. **A list of the information or fields** - that will be recorded on the form should be completed. These fields should then be arranged in their order of appearance on the form.

2. **The amount of space an answer will require** - should be indicated in tenths of an inch next to each field. Some open-ended questions may be converted into pre-printed ballot box choices whenever a limited, predictable number of answers are possible.

3. **Proceed with forms layout** - using forms design paper, a sharp pencil and a ruler, or automated equipment:

    a. Draw all four margins,

    b. Place the form title and instructions, if needed, inside the top margin,

    c. Place the fields and boxes on the form, working left to right, top to bottom, using the list of necessary information that was compiled in step #1, and

    d. Enter the marginals and form number in the proper location.

This preliminary design or rough draft may now be photocopied and distributed for review. Agencies that will be using the form to collect information, or any others who might enter or extract information from the form should be included in the review process.

After the draft form has been reviewed and approved by all of the offices concerned, a copy may be used to prepare the camera-ready original and print the form. This work can be performed in-house or by a private vendor.

Forms History Files

Establishing a forms history file will enable the forms manager to maintain a selective, organized collection of data on the form itself. This information can assist the manager in making decisions about ordering new or current forms, identifying forms which contain duplicated information, defining the cost of forms and tracking the review process for new forms.

When creating a forms history file, one file folder should be used for each form. Each folder should be labeled with the form's name and number. Forms should be filed numerically by the form number. Each folder should contain the following:

1. Two samples of the form,
2. Drafts of proposed revisions of the form, if any,
3. All correspondence relating to the form, including approval signatures,
4. The camera-ready original, and
5. Details of ordering history, e.g., quantities, printing methods, and information such as listings of vendors and turn-around times.

Forms Procurement

When purchasing forms, care must be taken to order the correct amount. Too small a quantity will result in a higher cost per unit of the form. Insufficient quantities also increase the danger of prematurely exhausting the existing supply. A lack of necessary forms can prevent an organization from doing its job.

An excessive supply of any given form will add to storage costs. If a form becomes obsolete because of changes in programs or procedures, the excess supply will become useless. A good working relationship with suppliers can aid forms management efforts. Generally, most forms vendors have broad experience in the industry and can offer good advice.

A twelve to eighteen month supply of every form used by an office is the maximum amount recommended. To avoid depleting stock, inventory control is essential. This allows regulation of purchasing so that forms are on hand when needed. The ordering process must be anticipated so that new shipments are received when only one month's supply remains.

Developing Forms Management Options

Choice of an approach to obtaining forms management services for an agency or authority is determined by several factors. The content of many forms used by county government is often legislatively mandated or required by federal guidelines. A county can institute its own forms management program by:

1. Hiring a professional forms analyst,

2. Incorporating forms management duties into the responsibilities of existing in-house records and information management experts and providing adequate training, or

3. Contracting with a commercial forms design or printing firm to provide forms design and management.

The major concern of any arrangement which provides forms management expertise to county agencies is to design and produce documents that collect information in the most efficient, cost-effective manner possible. Forms design should aid the respondent, who must complete the form, as well as the county employee who must extract information from it.

Summary

Forms management assures that forms needed to collect information are designed, produced, revised and distributed in the most cost-effective and efficient manner possible, and that unnecessary forms are eliminated.

Some basic forms management considerations include conducting forms analyses, incorporating basic forms design elements, creating forms history files, and maintaining control over the purchase of forms. Basic forms design elements include ballot boxes, captions, distribution and routing information, form number, ink, instructions, line weights, margins, paper size and color, shading, spacing, titles, and type styles and sizes.

Approaches to obtaining forms management include hiring a forms designer, incorporating forms management duties into the responsibilities of an existing, appropriate staff member, or contracting with a vendor to supply part or all of an agency's forms design and management needs.

Consultations about forms analysis and design, or advice about establishing forms management programs are available free of charge. For assistance call the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3200, or write: Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.